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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001619

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09-17-13

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Tiger attacks in the east spark deep Muslim anxiety about the peace process

Refs: Colombo 1615, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Attacks by the Tigers in the east have intensified Muslim anxiety about the direction of the peace process. Muslim leader Rauf Hakeem has pressed the GSL to take a harder line toward the Tigers. While Hakeem continues to back the government, some in his party have indicated a willingness to bolt to the opposition. There are also unconfirmed reports that Muslim extremist activity in the east is on the rise. As the GSL possibly enters into discussions aimed at turning over de jure interim control of the north/east to the Tigers, Muslim concerns are bound to rise. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) HEIGHTENED MUSLIM ANXIETY: Recent attacks on Muslims in the east have intensified Muslim anxiety about the direction of Sri Lanka's peace process. In the most recent flurry of attacks, which took place in the mid-August timeframe, up to five Muslims were killed, and numerous Muslim-owned businesses and homes were burned down in attacks carried out by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) cadre (see Reftels). Two Tamils, who may have been affiliated with the LTTE, were also killed in apparent counterattacks by Muslims. Since the August wave of attacks concluded, Mission has received additional reports that Muslims in the east have been harassed by LTTE cadre and forced to pay taxes to the group. In particular, LTTE pressure on Muslims living in the town of Mutur south of Trincomalee and along the coast in Ampara District is said to be quite high (see Reftels). When queried about the situation, M.A.M. Mahroof, a UNP MP from Trincomalee District, told us on September 16 that trucks he owns have been recently stolen by LTTE cadre, and that his constituents have faced similar problems with the hijacking of vehicles and pilfering of supplies by the LTTE.

3. (C) The cumulative impact of the August attacks and those in previous months, as well as the constant harassment, is weighing heavily on Muslims. (Note: In addition to the August wave, serious Muslim-LTTE skirmishes took place in the east in March-April 2003, October 2002, and June 2002.) M.L.A.M. Hizbullah, a National Unity Alliance (NUA) MP from Batticaloa District, told us on September 17 that Muslims in the east "deeply distrust" the LTTE and remained very worried that the government was not fully committed to protecting them. Hizbullah added that he thought Muslims and the LTTE could still come to some sort of "understanding," but additional attacks instigated by the LTTE would stretch relations to the breaking point.

4. (C) MUSLIM LEADER PRESSES GSL: In reaction to his community's concerns, Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), and Minister of Ports and Shipping, has publicly urged the government to crack down on the LTTE. In response, G.L. Peiris, the GSL's public spokesman, has said the government was trying to do its best within the parameters of the peace process. Hakeem, who in the past has been part of the GSL team at the peace talks, has also advocated that Muslims be allowed to send their own separate delegation to join the government and LTTE delegations at any future rounds of talks. The government has basically agreed to allow Muslims to do this. The LTTE continues to object to the idea, however, asserting that there are only two sides to the conflict, the Tigers and the Colombo government.

5. (C) THREATS TO BOLT GOVERNMENT: Although Hakeem continues to back the government, some in his party have bitterly complained about the situation in the east and have indicated a willingness to bolt to the opposition in protest. A.L.M. Athaullah and M.B.M. Abdul Cader, two SLMC MPs from the east, for example, have been highly critical of Hakeem and the GSL, claiming that Muslims need security and the government was failing them. While both men remain technically in the SLMC fold, they have made clear that they would cross over to opposition ranks if more was not done for Muslims.

Given its slim majority in Parliament, even a move of several seats could precipitate a fall in the United National Party (UNP) governing coalition. For these reasons, Hakeem and other members of the government, including Prime Minister Wickremesinghe himself, have been working overtime to ensure that the SLMC dissidents were carefully catered to and were not tempted to defect.

16. (C) RADICALIZATION IN THE EAST?: Amid the latest spate of violence in the east, Mission has heard fresh reports that some Muslims have become radicalized and have joined armed groups. These groups, which are reportedly quite small, are said to have names like "Osama" and "Jihad." In a recent conversation with polchief, M.N. Junaid, the Interior Secretary and a Muslim who keeps close watch on the situation in the east, reported that he thought the latest tensions in the east might be helping spur the formation of radical groups. Junaid noted, however, that the GSL did not think that the group's were large in size, nor did they possess many weapons, and overall did not form much of a threat. Nonetheless, the government continued to closely monitor the situation. In a sign that the level of anxiety is even affecting normally moderate politicians, however, Ferial Ashraff, a MP and leader of the NUA, was recently quoted as warning the government that Muslims might need to take up arms to protect their interests.

17. (C) COMMENT: Tensions in the east seem only set to rise in coming months, unfortunately. This assessment is based on the possible start of direct negotiations between the government and the Tigers over the GSL's north/east interim administration proposal. If the government's proposal is accepted in its broad outlines, it would effectively provide the LTTE with de jure interim control of the north/east pending a final settlement of the conflict. Muslims, who represent somewhere over 30 percent of the population in the east (and seven percent nationally), probably will play hardball with the government to ensure that their interests in the east are fully protected. The GSL's problem is that the LTTE might not be in the mood to provide the needed assurances -- or, if given, Muslims may not believe them. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

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